

Report of the National Urban League Conference
Columbus, Ohio, September 27 - October 4, 1944

By Ray Morris

As a newcomer to the Urban League, the Annual Conference of the National Urban League in Columbus, Ohio, September 28 through October 4th, was of inestimable value. It provided a deep reservoir of knowledge and personalities readily accessible for complete absorption, discriminate tasting, or careful chewing and digestion of selected areas. Your Industrial Secretary followed the latter mentioned course. His role seemed to be that of careful listening, questioning, and some contribution with respect to problems worked on by Urban League affiliates all over the country. Moreover, the problems attracting his deeper interest were not all primarily within the usual program of an industrial secretary. He feels that, there is a distinct connection between an individual's work-habits and the morale of a worker-group, and every major problem of the community that affects them. Therefore, he relished the unique opportunity to learn what has been done, is being done, and is to be done in many communities having problems similar to problems faced in Newark, New Jersey.

The first open meeting on the evening of the opening day brought welcomes and messages to those assembled, and helped erase any possible thoughts of individualism that this Conference was not one of very great moment. A telegram from the President of the United States, as follows: "I send my greetings to the National Urban League on the occasion of its third war-time conference. Today we are one year nearer the success symbolized by your slogan, 'Victory Through Unity.' I am happy to assure you that the efforts we have made for unity in the war must be the basis for the creative future of all Americans devoted to this nation and its promise for us all." - Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

From the opening session through the last session there was food for thought, and ideas stimulated for concrete action. The Honorable Francis Biddle, Attorney General of the United States, speaking at a public session on the first evening of the Conference, traced the progress of the fight for civil liberties during the last hundred years, laying particular stress on what has occurred since Mr. Roosevelt became President. Mr. Biddle said, "Eighty years ago, after the Civil War, the Union States passed laws which should have protected Negroes and other minorities from State action, but gradually through construction, repeal and disuse these laws became ineffective. In the last five years, they have been revived and effectively used by the Department of Justice, particularly for the protection of Negroes, and the test cases that have gone to the Supreme Court indicate that the federal law can be used with constantly increasing success." He stated further that the success of programs for the protection of the civil rights of Negroes depends largely upon local public opinion.

The very first session of the Conference, "Living Together as Americans All" was addressed by Miss Gertrude Wilson, Professor of Social Group Work, School of Applied Social Sciences, University of Pittsburgh, and by Mr. P. L. Prattis, Executive Editor, "The Pittsburgh Courier." At a subsequent session, "Urban League Machinery in Operation". Miss Wilson highlighted the discussion period by raising a question of why the Urban League, with its distinct interracial interest, work, and outlook, does not employ white staff members. "Why does it (the Urban League) discriminate against white social workers in hiring for staff?" The answer was readily forthcoming - (1) that local communities (there is a white person on the staff & the National Office), expect and demand that their local Urban League use only Negro staff members since, normally, there are so few opportunities for Negro professional social workers; (2) the nature of Urban League work among Negroes is usually more successful with Negro staff having a deeper understanding of trust from the Negro community. It is this writer's opinion that this problem needs greater clarification in local communities and League offices.

Mr. R. Rabin, Vice President, National Meltling Company, was one of three persons who addressed the fourth session. He related the techniques of the democratic approach his company has used in employment and upgrading, and the success there from. National Meltling Company is one of the outstanding examples of good and successful integration of Negro and white workers. There was a decision to use Negro and white labor without discrimination, to either group. Negroes were found to be lacking in higher industrial skills more so than whites, because opportunities to acquire such skills have been denied them generally. The company addressed itself to the problem of negating this disadvantage by training large numbers of Negroes, i. e., by providing training for a job requiring a skill the particular Negro was capable of acquiring and wished to acquire. This has served to counteract the inequities in skills possessed by Negro and white workers in the company's employ.

The Industrial Secretaries' Council was a clearing ground for particular problems faced by Industrial Secretaries in their local communities. It was in the two sessions of this council that your worker was able to contribute most. Techniques used here in our Newark area were related and our analysis of these techniques as they may be used in other offices.

The fifth session brought out a great deal of discussion about full employment and whether the Urban League should endorse the stand taken by Unions that no special treatment should be given Negroes as a group since they have not had access to industrial jobs long enough to acquire enough seniority to be in fair competition with whites for post-war jobs. Your Industrial Secretary's thinking was greatly stimulated by the pros and cons of this matter, and he feels that there should certainly be a unanimity of opinion of the Newark Urban League about it.

Significant in the address of Administrator John B. Blanford, Jr., of the National Housing Agency, was his assertion that some 17,000 privately-financed accommodations for non-white families will be made available under the NHA's war housing program. As of September, he said, 4,800 of these had been completed and nearly 10,000 others were under construction. He stated, "These are good size figures, but they are not a drop in the bucket compared to the amount needed in the days ahead. The important thing is that private financing of housing available for Negroes has not been provided in the past - but an entering wedge has been driven at last."

Regarding the Government's efforts to meet the housing needs of Negro war workers, Mr. Blanford pointed out that as of last June 30, approximately 10,000 units - or about 10 percent of the total publicly-financed part of the war housing program - had been made available to Negroes, 83 per cent of them for families. Mr. Blanford was bombarded with questions about (1) the NHA's reluctance to hold firm when the percentage of space for Negroes in new housing is challenged by local groups; and (2) the failure to permit excess war housing in some areas to be used by families of men in the service when those families are disrupted by moving nearer the service man, or are in need of additional facilities as a result of births. The answers to these problems apparently will have to begin at the local level and force their way upwards.